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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000237

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COMMERCE FOR ITA JEAN KELLY

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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON A MON STATE OF MIND

REF: RANGOON 206

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.5 (B,D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Emboff and FSN met Feb 14 with a high-level New Mon State Party (NMSP) delegation visiting Rangoon to meet with the PM and to attend the 57th Union Day activities -- including the State Banquet hosted by Than Shwe. The NMSP, one of the major cease-fire groups, discussed a wide array of issues in Mon State, including religious tolerance, how GOB officials are involved in trafficking in persons, a festering SPDC land confiscation issue, the KNU cease-fire effect on the road map, Mon refugee concerns, Burmese Army child soldiers, and DKBA drug running. END SUMMARY.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE, TO A POINT

¶2. (C) Our Mon interlocutors told us there are numerous Muslim communities in Mon State, especially in the NMSP-controlled areas between Moulmein and Kyaikmayaw Townships. The October and November Buddhist-Muslim riots in central Burma didn't affect Mon State even though the majority of the Mon State population is Mon Buddhist. The NMSP leaders said this tolerance is due to the NMSP policy of "harmonious settlement" of communities and because the NMSP "allows the Muslims to practice freely as long as they don't create any problems."

OFFICIAL INVOLVEMENT IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING

¶3. (C) Human trafficking is rampant in Mon State, a main route for migrants and traffickers heading to Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia through southeast Burma. Because of the depressed local economy, the NMSP allows males to travel from their communities across the borders. For Mon women, the NMSP and Mon community leaders, while trying to educate their women on the dangers of migration, approach the problem by simply banning Mon women from traveling. But brokers and traffickers have organized a systematic process with the help of field-level officials from GOB immigration, police, the Burmese Army (BA), and the Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence (OCMI), and they are still taking an untold number across. According to the NMSP, these lower-level officials "coordinate trafficking activities with the Thai and Malay police." The total number of trafficking victims is unknown, but the NMSP believes it is a "large number." (Embassy Comment: The NMSP leaders didn't specify if these were cases of trafficking or migrant smuggling.)

FESTERING SORE OF LAND CONFISCATION

¶4. (C) According to the NMSP leaders, in July 2003, the BA confiscated land to expand its Yay Township brigade by ten battalions, dispossessing families from about 3,000 acres of land. The NMSP leadership raised the matter with then Secretary-1 (now PM) Khin Nyunt in August 2003 and requested

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compensation for the land. The General promised the GOB would compensate land owners, but after several days the SPDC said it would only compensate for plants left behind at a rate of 300 kyat (.31 cents) for fruit bearing trees, and 150 kyat (.15 cents) for trees without fruit. Owners would get no compensation for land without plants as the land was declared "State Owned Property." NMSP has not accepted this answer, and has sought ICRC assistance to settle the matter.

KNU CEASE-FIRE: FOR THE ROAD MAP

¶5. (C) NMSP expects the SPDC and KNU will eventually reach a political settlement since the SPDC is eager to settle all its ethnic problems as soon as possible to execute the road map. NMSP also commented that two 70-truck convoys of three BA battalions seen by Emboffs in Mon State in early February could be BA preparations for new offensive operations. (Comment: However, Karen contacts told us during a a Feb 12 Union Day Dinner with the UNA that these large BA convoys could be reinforcements for the demarcation process and to provide security for an imminent Mae Sot-to-Myawaddy road project.)

MON IDP/REFUGEES: DEFORESTATION WHILE SITTING TIGHT

6 (C) According to the NMSP leadership, there are three Mon "refugee" camps just on the Burma side of the Thai-Burma border, Kolokhani, Yay-Chaung Phya, and Kin-Chung Phay, with 1,500 families totaling 7,000 internally displaced persons. Before the 1996 SPDC-NMSP cease-fire, these IDPs were forced to evacuate their native villages and resettle in the camps on the border. The Burma Border Coalition (BBC) provides rice and MSF-Holland provides health care to the IDPs. However, the NMSP is increasingly concerned that three months ago, BBC reduced assistance to the Mon IDPs and that they are facing food and medicine problems. The Mon IDPs have begun clearing the forests in the surrounding area to prepare for planting the rice crops they will now need.

17. (C) According to the NMSP leaders, currently these IDPs have little intention of returning to their original villages because of better job opportunities in Thailand. The IDPs are also concerned about the fragility of the SPDC-NMSP cease-fire, which they feel could be violated by the SPDC at anytime. Several concerns have to be answered before IDPs return to their home villages: 1) because of their long stay along the border they will feel alien if resettled back inside the region; 2) educational concerns for the children; 3) health care concerns; 4) work concerns. Asked if the SPDC-NMSP cease-fire is fragile, the NMSP replied "it is only a gentlemen's agreement."

#### JUST SAY "NO!" TO THE DRUG-RUNNING DKBA

18. (C) The NMSP Vice Chairman told Poloff that in early January the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a pro-SPDC KNU splinter group, tried to smuggle heroin and methamphetamines to Thailand through NMSP territory near Three Pagoda Pass. An NMSP patrol stopped and challenged the DKBA convoy, resulting in a short fire-fight. The DKBA retreated, leaving behind one DKBA killed, a small bag of heroin, and a handful of methamphetamines. The NMSP, negotiating through OCMI intermediaries, had to compensate the family of the dead DKBA soldier with 1 million kyat (about \$860) to resolve the issue with the DKBA. The NMSP informed the DKBA they won't allow any drug trafficking through their area.

#### ANY CHILD SOLDERS?

19. (C) According to the NMSP, there are "a lot of 15 and 16 year old child soldiers in the DKBA." As for the BA, the NMSP leaders estimated there are about 30 soldiers per BA battalion under 18 years of age, some 15 and 16. When pressed on the number actually observed, our NMSP interlocutors said they hadn't seen many recently, adding their number "was just a guess." However, they offered that in the BA, underage soldiers are kept in support jobs back in headquarters compounds, or are posted to frontier areas where foreigners won't see them. Young people don't want to join the BA, but USDA and the Fire Brigades force them to join the army. (Comment: Their "30 child-soldiers per battalion" figure could be an figure based on NMSP experience fighting the BA in the mid 1990s when BA recruiting efforts would have been more frantic and child recruiting more common. However, if still current, the number would equate roughly to 6,450 child soldiers in the BA's estimated 215 battalions)

110. (C) COMMENT: The Mon leaders were very engaging and talkative, which makes for a very refreshing meeting in this police state. The land confiscation issue has remained a major bone of contention between the NMSP and the SPDC, and if the SPDC continues to ignore Mon requests for compensation, the eight-year-old "gentlemen's agreement" cease-fire may possibly be undermined. END COMMENT.  
Martinez